

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

DAY OF THE DEAD



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Day Of The Dead

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“Your friend not with you?”

The Doctor turned toward the voice and encountered the middle-aged woman who ran *The Three Crowns*. He was in the inn’s taproom, which was festooned with orange and black streamers looping from the ceiling and cardboard cut-outs of black cats, witches and broomsticks decorating the walls. Jack-o-lanterns, with flickering eyes and teeth, graced each table while jointed skeletons jiggled merrily above the bar. The room was filling with local and visitor alike.

“Silver’s gone over to Scorhill Circle. She’ll be back a little later.”

“Gone to celebrate Halloween on her own has she? Well never you mind, Doctor. There will be plenty of celebrating going on right here. I think the apple bobbing is about to start.”

“Bobbing for apples. I can’t say I’ve ever tried it.”

The innkeeper’s eyebrows climbed her forehead. “And you a grown man.”

The Doctor smiled. “But there’s always a first time for everything, Mrs. Grey. I think I’ll go over and watch for a while.”

The Doctor moved away and Mrs. Grey’s laughter pursued him.

“Be prepared to get a little wet, Doctor.”

* * *

Kneeling inside the circle of cast salt, Silver lit the black taper.

“I call upon the Dark Mother, ruler of the night, Goddess of Death and Rebirth. Hear and behold your child this night, as I honor thee and thy realm. I stand humbly before thee, asking for thy blessing and favor. Lift, now, the veil between the worlds, as this time-out-of-time begins, that I may commune with those who have journeyed to the Summerlands.”

Silver glanced at her sheet of instructions... *‘Step back from the altar and concentrate on the Goddess candle’s flame. Should it rise and flicker, proceed. If not, silently project your wish to commune with your loved ones that have passed on.’*

She concentrated on the black candle and saw the flame momentarily swell and ebb. It brought a smile to her face. The ritual was proceeding with better success than ever before and the responses mentioned in the text were actually happening. Perhaps it was the setting. Previously she had invoked the Samhain ritual in the United States whereas now she stood on the same ground as the ancient Celts who had practiced this ritual for centuries.

Silver leaned forward and lit another candle invoking the Dark Father, aged consort of the Crone and Lord of the Underworld. Again, she felt the air around her weighted with that poignancy experienced during a lightning storm. She placed the photo of her dead parents in the centre of the circle and concentrated on it...willed them to come to her. Nothing happened. Her obstinate parents stayed as mute as ever to her call. Tears blurred her vision. She broke the circle of salt with her hand.

“I want to go home.”

A child’s voice broke the unhappy solitude. Whirling around, Silver saw a blond boy of about nine or ten years of age standing behind her. He was dressed in costume, but it was not the typical Halloween garb of a ghoulish ghost or other nasty. Rather, his attire resembled clothing that children might have worn centuries ago. Perhaps there was a historical pageant missing one of its players.

“You scared me.” Silver looked into a pair of discerning blue eyes perfectly placed above a small nose that overlooked a Cupid’s bow mouth. This was, she decided, a very beautiful looking boy. “Are you lost?”

“I can’t remember the way home.”

“Is home in Chagford?”

“Yes.” The boy smiled. “That’s right. I live in Chagford near the church.”

* * *

The Doctor watched as three people with their hands clasped behind their backs leaned over a tub of water and tried to bite into an apple. It was, the Doctor decided, possible to retrieve the apple without getting wet but judging by the laughter, a wet face and neck seemed to be part of the enjoyment.

“All right, who’s next?”

The speaker was a man in his early forties who had been hanging decorations in the inn’s lobby when the Doctor and Silver had first arrived. Mrs. Grey tapped the man on the shoulder as she passed by on one of her many errands.

“Burnell, don’t let the Doctor get away. He said he’s never bobbed for apples before.”

“Never bobbed for apples!” Burnell’s aghast expression perfectly duplicated Mrs. Grey’s earlier one. “We’ll rectify that. Over you come then.”

“But...”

“Mother Cleary will hold your hat and you’d best take off your coat if you’ve a mind not to get it wet.”

The Doctor removed his hat reluctantly and handed it to the old woman seated behind a small table upon which rested a deck of tarot cards.

“Just the hat will be fine, thank you, Mother Cleary.”

“Suit yourself,” said Burnell. He winked at his small audience. “We’ve got us a fine one here, ladies and gentlemen.”

“When was the last time you bobbed for an apple, Burnell?” the Doctor asked. “Perhaps you could show me how it’s done.” The small crowd whooped its support. Holding the Doctor’s challenging gaze, Burnell’s face broke into a grin.

“All right, stranger, I’ll bob against you. But be warned, I was Chagford champion as a youngster.”

The two men squared off on either side of the tub while the audience shouted their encouragement, watching as water sloshed over the sides of the tub and the apples bobbed around in the tumultuous water.

In the corner, however, Mother Cleary remained silent. Twirling the Doctor’s hat absently in her fingers, her wrinkled features seemed to tighten as she reached for the tarot deck on her table. She shuffled them quickly without fanfare, and looked down as if observing herself picking cards off the deck.

The Fool.

Mother Cleary placed the card in front of the deck, laying it down carefully.

The Trickster.

She placed the next card a few inches to its right.

Death.

She slotted the card neatly in between them.

Water dripped off the apple held in the Doctor's teeth. Of the two of them, only the apple was wet. Burnell's face and beard streamed water as he pulled his apple out of the tub a fraction too late.

The crowd cheered.

The Sun.

This she placed above Death.

The Wheel of Time.

Completing a neat cross, she placed it below Death.

Taking a bite out of his apple, the Doctor shook hands with Burnell.

"Well met, Doctor. Perhaps if you're passing through Dartmoor this time next year you'll consider coming to Chagford to give me the benefit of a rematch."

"Consider it done."

Turning to fetch his hat, the Doctor frowned as he caught sight of the tarot reading on the table.

"You'll need to decide which you are," said Mother Cleary. She pointed a gnarled finger at the upturned cards. "The Trickster or The Fool...for only one will survive this night."

"I didn't ask for a reading."

The old woman shrugged. "The spirits are loud tonight and when they talk, I listen. Make of it what you will."

The Doctor paused and looked straight at her, as if trying to penetrate what she was saying by looking into her mind. Finally, he took his hat and turned from the table without another word. As he wended his way through the crowd, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Pay it no heed. She meant no harm." Burnell glanced in the old woman's direction. "Has always been a bit of a busybody, Mother Cleary. Use to tell my Ma what I'd been up to as a lad even though the old crone hadn't set foot outside her cottage all day." Burnell used his hand to steer the Doctor toward the bar. "Here, why don't I buy you a drink to take that frown off your face? Or better still, challenge you to a game of snooker to reclaim some of my lost glory."

"Billiards!"

"Do you play?"

"I haven't for a while."

"Good," said Burnell cheerfully. "Then you and I are next." He placed a couple of coins on the edge of the pool table. "Now for that drink."

"That's really not necessary."

"Nonsense. Halloween brings us many visitors and I always like hearing about the places they've seen and lived in. I haven't been much beyond Chagford myself. But you, Doctor, look like you've traveled extensively and know a lot about the places you've visited."

"Indeed, I am a traveler."

"I knew it. Now, about that drink so your throat doesn't become parched as you tell me about some of the places you've been. What will it be?"

"A spot of mulled wine will be fine, thank you."

"In keeping with the occasion, of course." Burnell grabbed a mug from behind the bar. "Samhain wine is one of our oldest recipes."

"Samhain, that's the older name for Halloween isn't it?" The Doctor sipped his wine whilst identifying the apple, mint and nutmeg – traditional fare of the Samhain festival.

Burnell joined the Doctor in sampling the wine. "Yes. Samhain celebrates the Feast of the Dead: the one night of the year when the dead could return to the land of the living."

The time when the great Sidhe mounds were opened up, with lighted torches lining the walls, so the dead could find their way back from the Summerlands. Our forest may be silent now, but the legends are not forgotten. And they're far more complex than Halloween's corruption to a simple idea of 'Trick or Treating'."

"Couldn't agree with you more," said the Doctor, taking a sip of wine.

* * *

At the edge of the circle, Silver stepped into the dimness of the forest. The twilight was deeper here. Her chest-high companion walked silently beside her.

"So, lost boy, do you have a name?"

"Alston."

"Well, Alston. I'm Silver."

Alston stared into the forest, then up at the greying sky. "We should hurry. It's not safe to be in the forest after full dark."

"All right." Silver quickened her pace imagining the ferocious squirrels that might be waiting to pounce from the trees. She tried to keep the smile off her face, for the boy seemed genuinely agitated and apprehensive. Perhaps his mother had been telling him stories to keep him out of the forest. Or maybe, there were wild pigs in these parts. Wild dogs?

Something dark flitted across the path up ahead in the shadows. It was small...a hare maybe, or a squirrel, but it didn't seem to move like either. It wasn't graceful, more crablike.

Alston took her elbow, and an even greater sense of urgency came through in his voice. "We need to move quickly." He pulled at her arm and Silver fell into a trot. The boy's resolve and his sense of urgency transmitted across his grip into her arm. She started to feel nervous.

"Alston, what happens in the forest after dark?"

"The fey will hunt the forest."

"The fey? What, elves and fairies?"

"Yes."

Silver slowed her pace — she was letting a child's imagination spook her. Then she stopped, bringing Alston to an unexpected halt.

Ahead, the pale image of a woman with free flowing hair and dressed in a blouse and long skirt had floated from behind a tree onto the path. The image was slightly transparent — Silver could see tree trunks through the woman's body. Silver felt her face go completely white.

Alston tugged on her arm. "For goodness sake, don't stop, we've got to keep moving."

Silver tried to speak without success. She swallowed and tried again. "It's a g...ghost."

"It won't hurt us. Now come on." Alston had her hand and pulled on it using all his weight. Silver stumbled forward. The ghost moved across the path and slipped off into the opposite stretch of forest. The track ahead was clear and Silver let Alston lead her forward.

She had taken no more than a few unsteady steps when a creature broke from the undergrowth and skittered across in front of Alston. It was small, no taller than the boy's knee, with a thin leathery body sprouting a spindly pair of arms and legs. The head was large with huge gleaming eyes that took up most of the face. The mouth stretched horizontally across the face and split open to reveal long slivers of white teeth. It hissed at

them. Silver screamed while Alston booted the thing in the teeth. It became airborne and landed with a yelp back in the undergrowth.

Alston grabbed Silver's hand and dragged her forward.

"What was that...thing?"

"Imp," Alston replied. "Now come on. The Firbolg will be here soon and then the Sidhe."

* * *

"Green ball, corner pocket."

With a smart rap, the cue sent the white ball hurtling at the green, which ricocheted off the cushion in a line for the corner pocket. The Doctor straightened up from his shot to a round of applause as the green ball fell into the hole. He was calculating the force and angles required to sink the brown when the external door to the taproom opened and a man with ripped clothes, dishevelled hair and bloody scratches stood panting in the doorway.

"There are *things*, little...monsters! They're attacking us."

The dishevelled man pulled an equally dishevelled woman into view and pushed her into the taproom. She was sobbing hysterically, mascara leaking black lines down her face so that she resembled an unhappy clown.

Mrs. Grey entered the space that had cleared around the two bloodied arrivals. "Where were you attacked?"

"In the forest," the man said. "Deidre and I were...going for a walk...when all of a sudden these things were all over us."

"Well, it's all right now," said Mrs. Grey, placing an arm around the woman's shoulders. "Deidre, was it?" The woman nodded and Mrs. Grey signalled to the barmaid. "Celeste, take Deidre out into the kitchen and get her cleaned up."

"I heard a girl screaming," Deidre murmured as she was led away. Burnell put a shot glass into the dishevelled man's hand and he drank the contents in one gulp.

"She's right," the man said. "There are others out in the woods."

"I think we should take a look," Burnell said. He turned to the bar. "Barney, Sly: do you feel up to it?" The two men nodded.

"I'll come too," said the Doctor.

"No offence Doctor, but the three of us know these woods like the back of our hands. A stranger will only get lost or in the way."

"I understand. But I also have a young friend out there and I must see that she is okay. So, I'll either accompany you or go it alone."

Burnell studied the Doctor. "You won't reconsider?"

"No."

Burnell sighed. "Very well. Barney, there's some heavy-duty torches in the kitchen under the sink. I'm going to fetch my hunting rifle from the cellar. I'll meet you all outside in a couple of minutes."

The Doctor frowned at the mention of the rifle but said nothing. Someone had led the tousled man to the bar and a knot of people circled him like a bead set into macramé. The Doctor walked to the open door and stepped out into the cool night air. Sly silently joined him. Barney returned with the torches and handed one to Sly.

"This way." The silhouetted figure of Burnell stood at the Inn's edge. The Doctor followed as the locals moved off into the darkness.

* * *

It was the ugliest thing Silver had ever seen. Its skin resembled the imp, brown and leathery, but there were tufts of long hair sprouting in a hit and miss fashion all over its overdeveloped body. It was naked and as tall as a man with bulging muscles swathing its torso, encasing its massive legs and encircling its arms like vines growing over a tree trunk. The head was bald, the eyes small in a fleshy face, and it had a snout for a nose. Fangs curved over the lower lip and it snuffled at the air.

“Don’t move,” Alston said.

His hand was on her knee as they squatted in a ditch beside the track. Silver’s entire body was trembling but the boy’s hand was steady as he watched the monstrosity on the path with a sense of calm detachment.

“It can’t smell us downwind and its vision and hearing aren’t very good. Just stay still and it will move on.”

Silver’s body wanted to flee but she locked her arms around her knees and stayed in a crouch. Nearby, bracken snapped and crunched, and Silver’s breath hitched in her throat. Looking up, she saw the girl who had taken refuge on the other side of the track had stood up, her face a white mask of terror. A whine escaped the girl’s quivering lips and then she turned and fled down the path. The monster set off after her.

Alston edged forward and poked his head out of the undergrowth peering up and down the track. “Come on,” he said. “It’s clear.” He climbed up onto the path and offered Silver his hand.

“I don’t understand any of this,” she said, clambering up beside him.

“It’s Samhain, and the fey hunt the forest.”

She looked around at the dim outlines of trees and bracken. It felt alien and menacing, a place of natural order that no longer tolerated the isolated presence of men. Panic was threatening to overwhelm her like a scream. “Well, is there somewhere that we can hide?”

“The village will be safe.” He gave her a beatific smile. “It’s not far now, Silver.” He held her hand as she got to her feet. “This way.”

Their footsteps made crunching sounds on the pebbles that lay on a rough track leading up through the trees. As they battled their way through overhanging branches, Alston paused. Criss-crossing beams of light were playing off the trees up ahead.

“They’re not brands,” the boy said. As they waited, voices drifted on the night air.

“Torches,” Silver said. “Come on, it’s people.”

“But the light’s white.”

Silver tugged on the boy’s hand but he didn’t move. “Alston?”

He glanced up at her, a look of uncertainty on his face. “It could be the Sidhe.”

“They’re people, Alston, and I think I can hear my friend with them. Doctor!” Silver yelled. “Doctor, is that you?”

“Silver?”

The voices became excited and the beams of light moved closer toward them. A dark figure wearing a hat jogged into view.

“Doctor,” Silver exclaimed. “I’m so glad to see you.” Alston’s grip on her hand tightened so Silver could only give the Doctor a one-armed hug.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine, but there’s some strange things happening in the forest.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard.” The Doctor stared down at Alston. “Who’s this?”

“Alston,” Silver replied. The three men from the inn came to a halt behind the Doctor.

“Is this your friend?” Burnell asked.

“Yes, this is Silver.”

Stepping away from Silver, Alston turned to peer back down the path. He tugged at Silver’s hand. “We have to get off the path.”

Silver looked down at him. “Why?” She followed his gaze back down the track into the forest where it was lightening like a dawn before sunrise.

“Quickly!” He pulled so hard on her hand that she overbalanced.

“It’s okay, boy,” Burnell said. “If there’s anything down there we’ll take care of it.”

Alston grabbed Silver with both hands. “Please, Silver.” She stared into his widened eyes. For the first time, he was scared. Silver frowned. Was that music? She glanced away at the growing dawn. Music like tinkering bells was coming from that direction.

“They’re coming, Silver. We’ve got to hide.” Alston’s voice was a squeak, fear raising the pitch.

“Hide from what?” she asked.

“The Sidhe.” He let go of her hand and edged back toward the undergrowth. Turning, he ran into the bracken and Silver followed him. Alston reached a large tree, pausing to see if Silver followed him and then creeping behind it.

“Now what?” said Sly. He was staring at the approaching blaze of white light.

“Doctor,” Silver called from the tree. She waved a hand for him to join her and Alston.

The Doctor could hear music, like a soft chime of bells. A horn sounded, deep and resonating. It sent a shudder down his spine.

“I don’t know about you three, but I’m going to join Silver and the boy behind that tree.”

The Doctor strode into the forest. Seconds later, he heard Burnell, Sly and Barney swishing through the wispy bracken. The three men settled behind a tree in line with the one where the Doctor joined Silver and Alston. The boy was holding onto something that was tied to a leather thong around his neck.

The forest was lightening as if it was day and as the fake sun drew closer it speared shafts of light in all directions. Peering into the glare, the Doctor could make out a figure. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness he could discern a man dressed in glass-like armour riding a horse. It was the armour that glowed, sending out sparks of white light like an exploding firework. The luminosity washed the color from the man’s face, making it beautifully stark, except for the eyes that were a piercing blue beneath the open visor of his helm.

The apparition came closer. In one hand he held a spear from which hung a collection of silver bells that chimed as the horse stepped forward. His other gauntleted hand held the reigns. The line of the reigns tightened and the Doctor held his breath as the horse stopped. The horseman peered into the forest.

Emptiness. The Doctor did not know where the word in his head came from but he felt its essence of nullity settle around the tree. Nothingness engulfed him and it stretched its boundaries out to the tree where Burnell and the others hid. *The forest was empty. There was nothing here. Empty.*

The horseman looked away, swung his horse around and cantered back the way he’d come. The chimes faded and the light waned and dimmed. Alston collapsed against the

base of the tree. He was breathing deeply. The leather thong rested against his chest and the Doctor saw that it held a smoothly worn oval stone with a hole in the middle.

“Bres,” the boy murmured.

Burnell ran in a crouch from his tree. Barney and Sly followed him.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Burnell said. His voice betrayed his panic, but he remained in control of himself. “The Sidhe will hunt our forest again and we need to get to the safety of the inn.”

* * *

The Doctor stepped into the taproom and noticed that it had lost its earlier air of festivity. More injured people with wild eyes had arrived from the forest with their tales of ghosts and monsters. Old Mother Cleary ambled towards the returned party but stopped when her gaze fell on Alston.

“That boy is unnatural,” she hissed.

Silver frowned at the old woman. “What are you talking about? He’s just a boy.”

“He shouldn’t be here.”

“He shouldn’t be here...” Sly stammered. “What about that?”

Sly’s finger pointed at an apparition floating up in the rafters. It was a man dressed in a monk’s robe. His sandaled feet poked out the ragged hem, but the image was white and opaque, not solid and flesh.

“My god,” Mrs. Grey said, stepping back from the apparition and making the sign of the cross.

“What the hell is going on here?” the rumpled man from before asked. Bewilderment turned his youthful face child-like. His girlfriend, Deidre, clung steadfastly to his arm. Faint black lines still marred the girl’s face.

“He won’t hurt you,” Alston cried. The boy walked toward the ghost. “This is Ceirnan and he looked after me in the Summerlands.”

“Alston,” the ghost rumbled. “How does it feel to be home?”

“It’s changed,” the boy said. “I recognize very little of it.” Alston glanced around the taproom. “This is the inn but it’s very different.”

“The structure is the same,” Ceirnan said. “And it will still provide protection from the fey, but we’ve been gone for quite some time, lad. It is much later than I thought it would be.”

The boy frowned. Mother Cleary made a triangle out of her thumbs and forefingers and pointed it at the boy and the apparition. “Be gone.”

“I will do you no harm, woman.” The tetchy ghost descended from the ceiling to stand behind the boy, ignoring the old woman’s attempts at an incantation. “We were invited to return.” Ceirnan raised his hand and pointed his finger at Silver. “By that woman.”

All eyes swivelled to Silver who gaped like a landed fish. “I...I...”

“Silver,” the Doctor said evenly. He smiled reassuringly at the inn’s patrons. “What exactly did you do?”

“I enacted the Samhain ritual, called on the deities to lift the veil between the worlds so that I could commune with my ancestors.” Silver leaned in towards the Doctor. “But it didn’t work.”

“You asked to commune with those who had passed into the Summerlands,” Ceirnan corrected. “I heard your incantation, and you must be very powerful indeed to have penetrated the barriers.”

Silver's face registered shock and the Doctor touched her arm lightly.

"The TARDIS, Silver. It gifts you with the ability to communicate with other beings, and that's what happened."

"But, my parents?"

The Doctor frowned. "Either they didn't hear or they're not in the Summerlands."

"This is crazy," the dishevelled man said. He crossed to the external door dragging the despondent Deidre with him, but something glimpsed out the window halted him. "My god, there's someone fighting out there." Throwing the door open, the dishevelled man waved urgently at the fighter. "Over here, man. Quickly."

"What is that thing? It's as big as a bear," someone murmured.

Burnell moved to the window. "Get him in here and shut the door," he yelled at the dishevelled man.

The dishevelled man's eyes had gone wide. "There are more of them. Shutting the door isn't going to keep them out."

Burnell crossed to the door. "No, but the iron in the inn's foundations will stop them from coming inside." Burnell leant outside and, stepping hurriedly back, propelled a man bodily into the taproom. The door slammed shut.

* * *

Skidding to a halt on hands and knees, the newcomer sucked down gulps of air. Long black hair reached his waist but the sides hung free obscuring his face. He wore black boots and pants with a white shirt, and his left hand rested on a bloodied piece of wood.

The newcomer lifted his head, flicked a hank of hair over his shoulder and reviewed his surroundings. His pale face panned the inn's occupants and his eyes rested momentarily longer on Ceirnan and Alston than on the others until he reached the Doctor. At the Doctor, the stranger raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Fools," Ceirnan hissed. "You have invited the Lord of the Sidhe into your midst."

The stranger climbed to his feet. "Well, it seems I'm to have no secrets here."

His voice was low with a cadence that Silver felt could lull her to sleep if she listened to it too deeply.

"I am Lugh." He limped to a nearby table and set down his bloodied club. "I am grateful to be rescued from what was rapidly becoming an untenable position."

"I thought you enjoyed the hunt," Ceirnan commented acidly.

"Not tonight, and particularly not when I'm the prey. I think I prefer a less rigorous form of sport. What game is this?" Lugh limped to the billiard table. As the silence ensued, the Sidhe turned back to the inn's patrons. "I assume it does have a name?" His attention settled on Alston. "Alston?"

The boy looked at the floor. Silver thought he shuddered.

"I do not know its name, Lord."

Lugh stared down at the boy. "You disappoint me again, Alston."

The boy nodded slowly, not taking his eyes off the floor. He was visibly shaking. A bead of moisture fell from his face to hit the floor. It was quickly followed by another. With shock, Silver realized the boy was crying. He was in trouble and he was crying.

"Billiards," Silver blurted. Lugh's attention fell on her and Silver took a deep breath. The Sidhe had a disconcerting gaze; piercing green eyes that seemed to read every inch of her. "The game's called billiards."

“Billiards,” Lugh murmured. He returned his attention to the table and the balls laid out on the felt. “And who is champion of this game called billiards?” He eyed the crowd. “I would challenge them.”

Heads turned and Lugh followed the direction of their glances to the Doctor. “You?” he said. “The strange one who does not belong.” Intent upon the Doctor, the Sidhe Lord limped closer to see him better. Lugh studied him from head to toe. “You are the champion and I challenge thee.”

The Doctor cleared his throat. “I’m not interested in participating in a contest just right now.”

“I could make it worth your while, give you what your heart most desires.”

Lugh’s scrutiny of the Doctor deepened, and Silver thought the Sidhe’s eyes momentarily glowed.

“You feel responsible for the opening of the way between the worlds and are concerned for the safety of these people,” the Sidhe intoned. The Doctor shifted uncomfortably. Muttering rose from the inn’s patrons.

The Sidhe ignored everyone else and centered his attention on the Doctor. “I can offer you the opportunity to close the way.”

Silver saw surprise register on the Doctor’s face. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“To make it worth your while.”

“And if I lose?” the Doctor asked softly.

“Then I get what my heart most desires.”

The two men stared at each other. “And that would be?”

The Sidhe Lord laughed. It was a beautiful sound; rich and full like the dawning of a new day or the flush of spring stretching into an endless summer. “Simply to enjoy my life.”

The Doctor angled his head away and a frown pulled at his features. Silver pictured Lugh’s words resting behind the Doctor’s brow, each word sifted for meaning. Looking up at Lugh, the Doctor opened his mouth to speak but the Sidhe interrupted him.

“Questions. Always questions. At this rate we will never begin.” Lugh crossed his arms and glared at the Doctor. “If you have more questions, they will be answered from within the game, but you will forfeit your turn in the asking.”

“And you will answer truthfully?”

“Yes.”

The Doctor thought this over. “But, billiards can be won in a single turn. I may not get to ask a question or even to have a turn.” Exasperation lowered the Sidhe’s eyebrows over his eyes.

“Three games then. Winner of two takes all.”

“And the games?”

“Billiards.” Lugh pointed at the bar where three orange cups were turned face down on the counter. “Cups.” Quickly scanning the room, the Sidhe’s eyes fell upon a chequered board set with carved pieces. “And that game.”

“Billiards, cups and chess,” said the Doctor. “Very well.”

Lugh beamed a smile of triumph and limped over to the pool table. As the Doctor followed, Silver touched his arm.

“Be careful Doctor. I don’t like this, something’s not right.”

Ceirnan looked down his ghostly nose as the Doctor walked passed. “Beware, he’s marked you for the fool.”

The word echoed in the Doctor’s head and he caught old Mother Cleary’s eye.

The Fool.

* * *

Lugh broke and sunk a red ball followed by the yellow, another red but missed on the green. He'd been stretched across the table when a brief flash of pain appeared on his face marring his shot. The crowd was quiet and gathered away from the table so that the Doctor and Lugh had plenty of open space in which to stand.

"How were you injured?" the Doctor asked. Lugh stopped chalking his cue, placed the small blue cube back on the table's edge and bent over to take his next shot. He'd picked up the fundamentals of the game very quickly.

"I lost a battle, was captured and then maimed." The Sidhe potted a red, the green, another red, the brown, but missed on the next red.

"How did you escape your captivity?"

"The way opened and I fled into it."

The red fell, then the blue, another red but the Sidhe bungled the pink.

The Doctor held his cue upright between his hands, the butt-end resting against the floor. "And if you'd remained a captive, what would have happened to you?"

"You seem fonder of your questions than you do of playing," Lugh grumbled as he leaned over his cue to sight on the next red. "If I'd stayed, I'd have been executed."

The red ball bounded off the cushion, rolling toward the middle pocket and falling with a resounding clack against the ball already resting in the pocket's net. The cleared space around the Doctor and Lugh had contracted somewhat as people joined Silver in observing the game from a closer vantage but the air was hushed as if a major tournament was being played. Lugh sunk the pink, and then the next red so that only two reds and the black remained on the table, but the reds didn't matter – only the black. The Sidhe Lord edged his elbow back and then pushed his arm forward. A glass shattered and Lugh's body quivered. The white ball rolled but a few centimetres. He'd fudged the shot.

Silver glanced in the direction of the noise and saw Deidre standing over the shards of a broken glass. One hand, curled into a fist, pushed against her mouth and her eyes were huge. It didn't seem possible, but Deidre's eyes opened even wider so that Silver could see the whites surrounding the irises. A whine escaped her clutched fist and Silver turned back to the table to see Lugh staring at Deidre. The Sidhe Lord was still angled over his cue but his body was rigid. Silver could see the anger held taut in his stance, but it was nothing compared to the wrath that shone in his eyes.

The Doctor walked around the table and paused to study the layout of the balls. Lugh straightened; the Doctor's body interrupted his line of sight to Deidre. Squatting, so the edge of the table was at eye level, the Doctor checked the angles of a possible shot. He stood and moved closer to Lugh.

"Who is the Tanist?"

Lugh's grip on his cue tightened until the skin around his knuckles shone white. He shrugged, a slight roll of his shoulders, and lowered his body to take a shot.

"The Tanist." Lugh belted the white ball. It smacked into the red and sent it ricocheting off the cushions. "Is my adopted heir." Despite the force put into the shot, the red ball found a pocket. That left the black and the Sidhe Lord bent to the task. "There's been no competition here." The black fell in the hole. The white stayed on the table.

The Doctor placed his cue on the green felt. "Chess is more my game."

"Then we shall play now." Lugh turned from the pool table and limped toward the chessboard.

“Ah, in a few minutes, if you would. I’d like a break. You know, recharge the old batteries.” The Doctor tapped his chest lightly. Lugh frowned.

“Um, ten minutes. Study the board, if you like. I’ll be with you shortly.”

* * *

Lugh sat at the table in front of the black chess pieces. “Ceirnan, Alston, come here. I would have you explain this to me.”

The ghost said something to Alston, and the two moved toward the table. As he passed, Silver touched Alston’s shoulder and he looked up. There was misery in the boy’s eyes. She thought about grabbing his elbow and leading him away to safety but the Doctor had reached her side and took her arm.

“Let him go,” he said quietly. “We can’t help him yet and Lugh is his master.”

“Alston’s terrified of him.”

The Doctor sighed. “In legend, the fae can be unintentionally cruel.”

“Have you ever met one before?”

The Doctor shook his head slightly. He was staring at Lugh but there was blankness in his eyes as if he looked through and beyond the Sidhe Lord.

“Can you defeat him?”

“I have to.” Blinking like a bright light had just woken him up, the Doctor looked around at the inn’s patrons. “These people have been placed in danger by us.”

“Ryan O’Grady, do not open that door!” Burnell bellowed. The inn’s handyman crossed hastily to the door where a young man had his hand on the bar.

“I can’t stay here all night,” Ryan complained. His speech was a little slurred. “There’s nothing out there now.”

“You’ll stay until after cockcrow when it will be safe to go outside again.” Burnell pulled Ryan away from the door and led him toward the bar. “Come and have another drink on the house. It won’t be the first time you’ve bunked under a table after closing time. In fact everyone come and have a drink.”

“We can’t get them all drunk,” Mrs. Grey said aghast. She surveyed the gathering in her taproom. “We need food, lots of food. Celeste and Malcolm, the kitchen.”

Silver watched the woman who had earlier helped Deidre get cleaned up, walk toward the back of the taproom and the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. A man in black checked pants and a white double-breasted shirt – Malcolm the cook presumably – accompanied Celeste.

“So what do we do now?” Silver murmured.

“Find out as much as we can about Lugh and what’s supposed to happen tonight.”

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to talk to Ceirnan or Alston,” Silver said.

The ghost was pointing an eerie finger at the queen the Sidhe Lord held in his palm and speaking softly. In the chair opposite Lugh, Alston sat dejectedly in front of the white chess pieces.

“No, probably not. But local folk-lore might be able to fill us in on a couple of things and for that we need Burnell and Mother Cleary.”

The old woman sat at her card table. The Doctor steered Silver toward the bar where he raised his hand to catch Burnell’s attention. It looked like he was trying to order a drink.

“We need to talk,” the Doctor said to Burnell.

Burnell nodded. “Sly, can you take over here.”

Taking his drink with him, Sly switched to the other side of the bar. The Doctor, Silver and Burnell approached Mother Cleary.

“May we join you?” the Doctor asked.

The old woman shrugged but said nothing, so the Doctor sat indicating for Silver and Burnell to do the same.

“I need information,” began the Doctor. “I know that Lugh is the Sun God, maimed at Lughnasadh, and destined to die by the hand of his Tanist at Samhain.”

“That’s the general legend,” Burnell said. “But there’s also the suggestion that the Tanist is just another aspect of Lugh. Yet it would seem from what this Lugh said that the Tanist is his adopted heir and a real person.”

Silver put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “In the information I’ve read, the Maiden Goddess betrays Lugh at Lughnasadh and gives herself to the son, Tanist. Tanist then sleeps with the Goddess and sows the seed that allows Lugh to be reborn at Yule.”

“Most of the legends are an attempt to explain the cycle of the seasons,” Burnell said. “Lugh the Sun God, or God of Light, dies at the end of summer and takes away the light. Tanist, the Dark King, the Winter Lord and the Lord of Misrule assumes Lugh’s position and brings the night. Come Yule, Lugh is reborn and he rises in power to slay his rival at Beltane.”

“Lugh the Sun God, God of Light, the Trickster and the Fool,” Mother Cleary muttered.

The Doctor turned to the old woman. “Lugh is both Trickster and Fool?”

“Aye, he can be either but not at the same time. And you must decide which one you be, Trickster or Fool?”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “I take it the Fool dies?”

“The Fool always dies.”

“This doesn’t make much sense,” Silver grumbled.

“Actually, Silver, it makes perfect sense.” The Doctor tapped his lip with a finger. “Lugh is trying to avoid his death, presumably by letting another take his place.”

“So that other person then gets killed by the Tanist?”

“Yes.”

Burnell cleared his throat. “So who is the Tanist, if he’s not another aspect of Lugh?”

“Look at how the legends describe him,” the Doctor said. “A niggardly king who shines brightly but possesses no warmth. In other words, he’s a miser who is beautiful and cares about no one but himself.”

“Bres,” Burnell said.

“The name of the Sidhe from the forest,” Silver said. “The one Alston knew.”

“The Sidhe leading the hunt,” the Doctor said. “And I suspect they were hunting the escaped Lugh.”

“So now what do we do?” Silver asked.

“Look for a way to outwit Lugh,” the Doctor said. “This is the first time in living memory that the fae have returned to walk Chagford’s forest on Samhain.”

“But it doesn’t make sense. Why would Lugh put himself through this each Samhain?”

“He may have no choice. It’s possible that just a single time period in Sidhe history, the night of Lugh’s execution, gets played out over and over again on Samhain whereas in our world time has moved on. Except that after the last encounter centuries ago the way was closed.”

“So does Lugh remember each encounter or is it new each time?”

“I don’t know. If he remembers it will make him harder to defeat but then he’ll also know how the way was closed.”

Silver’s eyes went wide. “Could the two be connected? Did the way close because Lugh was defeated?”

“It’s a possibility.” The Doctor glanced over at the Sidhe Lord. Lugh had started a game of chess with Ceirnan although it was Alston who moved the ghost’s pieces. “We need to find out exactly what happened.” The Doctor leant in towards the middle of the table. Silver and Burnell sat forward in their seats bringing all their heads closer together. “I’ll question Lugh during our chess match —”.

“No!” Silver shook her head emphatically. The worry on her face was reflected in her voice. “Doctor, you forfeited billiards, you can’t afford to lose this game or it’s all over!”

“It will be all right, Silver.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “Chess is a very complex game and I’ve been schooled in its intricacies by some of the most devious minds that ever existed. Plus, I’m not in this alone. While I’m distracting Lugh, I want you and Burnell to see what you can learn from Ceirnan and Alston.”

“And what am I to do?” Mother Cleary asked.

The Doctor nodded deferentially to the old woman. “There may be details locked up in the Samhain legends on how to defeat Lugh. Mother Cleary, can you review your vast wealth of knowledge and let us know of any such details?”

“Doctor, it’s been over ten minutes.” Lugh’s low voice rumbled through the taproom. The background chatter of the patrons hushed to an expectant lull.

The Doctor sighed and pushed back his chair. He rose and turned to his adversary. His smile was one of equanimity. “Off course. My apologies for keeping you waiting.”

* * *

The Doctor took the seat recently vacated by Alston. The boy moved away from the table and the impending battle.

“Alston.”

The boy froze mid-step.

“I would have you attend me. Stand behind my chair.” The Sidhe’s eyes flicked to the ghost. “You too, Ceirnan.”

Ceirnan ghosted behind Lugh’s chair. Alston remained where he was, his small body quivering.

“Alston.” Lugh spoke softly but the demand in his voice could not be denied.

The boy’s body began to tremble. “No.” The word came out muffled as if ground between his teeth.

Lugh stared at the boy’s stiff back and said something in a language Silver could not understand. The words were musical, infused with an energy that wound around her and left her skin tingling as if from a lover’s caress. But Lugh’s words weren’t directed at her: their full effect fell on Alston. His body relaxed and the fear and anger evident in his face evaporated, leaving his expression blank and dreamlike. Silver saw his eyes were clear and glassy but unfocused. He moved as if dazed. Reaching out a hand to steady the boy, Lugh, brought Alston closer to his chair. The boy stepped out of Silver’s line of vision and she glimpsed the Doctor’s profile. A frown of distaste flickered across his face and was then gone. The Sidhe Lord raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“You disapprove, Doctor?”

“You used compulsion on the boy.” The Doctor’s voice was flat.

Looking up at the catalyst of the discussion, Lugh considered his charge. “Alston’s a beautiful child but unruly at times, as boys are known to be. I have no wish to mar his beauty, so I use other means to discipline him.”

“Other means? He’s a child, Lugh. His body can’t process the senses you just forced through him.”

The Sidhe shrugged. “The outcome is what I desire.” Lugh’s attention returned to the chessboard. “He becomes compliant, obedient, and less difficult.” Impatience had crept into the Sidhe’s voice. “Can we start this game now?”

The Doctor moved his Queen’s pawn two spaces forward.

Silver edged closer to Burnell. “We’re not going to be able to talk with Ceirnan or Alston.”

“No, you’re right, we can’t question them.” Burnell glanced over at the old woman they’d left sitting alone at the table. “We’ll have to rely on Mother Cleary and what the Doctor can get out of the Sidhe.”

Lugh moved a knight onto the field. In his previous turn, he had opened the way to bring his bishop out. With a fingertip, the Doctor edged one of his pawns forward. Lugh sent his bishop along a diagonal to the edge of the board.

“How was the way between the worlds sealed?”

The Doctor lost a pawn.

“I sealed it.”

“I take it that means he remembers all the past Samhains,” Burnell muttered to Silver. The Doctor moved a knight out of danger. Lugh brought out his queen.

“Why would you seal it?”

Lugh shifted his queen into a stronger offensive position. “It was what was demanded of me.”

Another pawn edged its way forward on the Doctor’s side of the board. Lugh caught himself a bishop.

“Demanded by whom?”

“A mortal. I don’t recall his name.” A black bishop penned in the Doctor’s knight. One more move and the knight would be trapped and taken.

“Did you and the mortal participate in a contest?”

The white knight was brought down and taken from the board. “Yes.”

The Doctor nudged a pawn forward. Lugh’s pieces began to form a cage around the white king.

“Your friend is going to get himself cornered if he’s not careful,” Burnell said. The smell of simmering stew and baking bread wafted from the kitchen. It made Silver’s mouth water. Other patrons gathered around the chess combatants looked longingly towards the kitchen.

Silver ignored her stomach and studied the chessboard. “I’ve seen this before. It’s what Lugh’s overlooking that will win the game for the Doctor.”

“What’s Lugh overlooking?”

“The pawns and he’s concentrating so much on his own attack that he’s starting to leave his king undefended.”

“Check.” The smile on Lugh’s face was predatory. The Doctor removed the potential threat with a bishop and the Sidhe swooped forward with his rook to assassinate the Doctor’s now unprotected queen. The knot of battle was centered at the Doctor’s end of the board with the white king inadvertently caught up in the middle of it.

“How did you lose the contest?”

Lugh studied the thick of the battle and edged the black queen menacingly closer to the white king. The Sun God still had most of his pieces whereas the Doctor oversaw a defeated army; his knight, bishops and queen were dejectedly lined up in front of the Sidhe. “A condition had to be met for me to win what I most desired. That condition was not met and in that context, I lost.”

The Doctor shunted a pawn forward. Lugh ignored the easy target of the Doctor’s rook sitting half way down the board and concentrated instead on closing his net tighter about the white king. Another three moves and the Doctor would be checkmated.

“What condition was not met?”

“The Tanist failed to kill the Fool.”

The white king’s knight was taken from the field and all that was left of the white army was the king, two rooks and two pawns. Down the Doctor’s end of the board, a sea of black pieces surrounded the white king and a white rook.

“How did the Fool avoid dying at the hands of the Tanist?”

Lugh shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t witness the encounter.” The Sidhe removed the white rook closest to the Doctor’s king and effectively closed down the last remaining escape route of the white king. The Sidhe sensing victory smiled at the Doctor. His prey was cornered with nowhere left to run. “However, curiosity forced me to ask the man how he had escaped death and he said Bres had been outwitted by a beautiful woman, a Belladonna.”

The Doctor pushed one of his pawns to the end of the board. “Return my queen and I think you’ll find yourself checkmated!”

Lugh sat back and surveyed the board. Wonder and admiration blossomed on his face. “That was very well done.” He was happy like a child at Christmas. “I didn’t see it coming at all. My attention was too focused on the battle at your end of the board, no doubt as you intended.” The Sun God beamed at the Doctor. “You are a worthy opponent, Doctor. I believe your win makes it one all. And that only leaves cups to play.”

The kitchen doors opened and Celeste, the cook and Mrs. Grey entered the taproom. Each carried a large tray covered with bowls of stew and a basket of bread.

The Doctor stretched and rose from the table. “I intend to have a bowl of stew before I do anything else. It’s long past suppertime.”

“Go ahead,” the Sidhe said graciously. “There’s plenty of time and cups is a very short game to play.”

* * *

The Doctor joined Silver, Burnell and Mother Cleary. The old woman had performed another tarot reading in his absence. On the table were the Fool, the Sailor, the Queen, Death, and the Wheel of Time. A tray containing four bowls of stew and steaming bread was going cold on the windowsill.

“You know I don’t like this,” the Doctor said.

Mother Cleary looked up from the cards and into the Doctor’s face. “Death and the Wheel of Time cling to you Doctor.”

“And the Fool too it seems.” The Doctor sat down. “But I do notice that the Trickster is missing in this latest shuffle of the cards.”

“You will choose to be the Fool in order to save the Sailor.”

“But the Fool dies,” Silver blurted. “And who the hell is the Sailor?”

“The Sailor is drowning. Both the Sailor and the Fool are facing death.” Mother Cleary pointed to the card showing a woman on the throne. “But the Queen sits above Death and it is she who has power over all.”

“And above time,” murmured the Doctor. “A beautiful woman with power over death and time.” The Doctor picked up the tarot cards and handed them back to Mother Cleary. “Silver, the food. I’m famished.”

“The woman who outwitted Bres,” Burnell said. He took a bowl and fork from Silver.

“The Dark Mother, the Goddess of Death and Rebirth,” Silver suggested.

“A beautiful woman who can kill or save,” the Doctor murmured. “Belladonna.” He took a mouthful of stew.

“Belladonna?” Silver queried.

The Doctor swallowed. “*Atropa belladonna*,” he said. “Deadly nightshade, a herb associated with Samhain.” Breaking his bread roll, the Doctor dunked it in his stew. “The Fool feigned his own death and Bres fell for it.”

“The Fool is permitted to take his own life,” Mother Cleary said.

Burnell’s fork was poised in mid air. “So who ever this person was, they lost the contest with Lugh but managed to trick Bres into thinking they were dead?”

“Yes,” the Doctor said. His fork scraped the bottom of the bowl as he cleaned out the last of the stew.

“Would the same ruse work on Bres again?” Burnell asked. “He may just run the victim through this time to be sure.”

Silver frowned. “Why would Bres accept another in Lugh’s place anyway? He wants his rival dead so he can take over the kingship. Killing a surrogate isn’t going to achieve that.”

“Glamour,” the Doctor explained. “Lugh’s I presume. Bres doesn’t see a surrogate, he sees the Sun God.”

“So in Bres’ mind he always kills Lugh.”

“Yes.”

“Then what happens when they return to the Summerlands?”

“Lugh miraculously turns up alive and he probably exiles or executes Bres,” Burnell said. “It would explain why the *Forus Feasa ar Erinn*’s account of the high kings of the Tuatha De Danaan has Lugh killed by Cermait’s three sons at the battle of Ulsneck and not by Bres.”

“But wouldn’t Bres be aware of the trickery and not fall for the replacement next Samhain?”

The Doctor shook his head. “He doesn’t realize he’s been duped until *after* Samhain. Bres only knows that he is killing Lugh over and over again, and I expect that in itself gives him great satisfaction.”

A shadow fell across the table and Alston stood at the Doctor’s elbow. The boy looked drained, physically and emotionally. “The Sun God asks if you are finished eating.”

Silver put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Alston, are you okay?”

He turned despondent eyes to her. “I’ve come home, Silver. I planned to stay here and return to my family. But my Lord tells me they no longer exist and Ceirnan confirmed it.” His eyes filled with tears and he looked at the floor. “I can never go home.”

“Oh, Alston.” Silver hugged the boy to her.

“Boy! I sent you on a message.” The Sidhe stood near the bar. There was a cleared area around him and the ghost at his back. It was as if they were actors standing on a stage with the audience a discrete distance away. “Deliver it and return.”

Silver held the boy tighter and glared at the Sidhe over Alston's head. "Leave him alone you piece of —"

A sharp pain in her shoulder caused her to gasp. The Doctor's hand rested on her shoulder and he used her like a bolster to stand up.

"He's delivered your message, Lugh." The Doctor walked over to the bar. "Why don't you let the boy eat something while we play this game? He must be hungry."

Lugh looked over the Doctor's shoulder. Silver kept her features as impassive as she could. She decided to break eye contact and look demurely at the ground.

"Very well. Give him some food."

The Doctor turned his back on the Sidhe. "Silver, take the boy to the kitchen and get him something hot to eat. The stew out here has turned cold."

Silver stood and ushered the boy toward the kitchen. She made sure her body shielded him from Lugh's view as they passed by. The Sidhe watched them go.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"Does it matter? We have a game to play." The Doctor approached the three orange cups sitting on the bar.

"That girl would steal my boy away from me if she had the chance."

"Alston doesn't belong to you."

"I'm his Lord." The Sidhe placed a hand on the bar and vaulted over to the serving side. It was like watching a gymnast twist over a pommel horse, the entire movement fluid and graceful. "I found him in the forest and took him back to the Summerlands to serve me."

"In other words you stole him."

"I told him he was free to return home whenever he pleased." The Sidhe tapped the bottom of three upturned cups.

"Was that before or after you sealed the way?"

Lugh picked up the left hand cup. A blue ball rested underneath it. He removed it. "You seem concerned about the boy." He turned up the other two cups. "Nothing under there."

"You stole his life away."

Lugh set all three cups upside down in a row. "I gave him a taste of immortality."

"Eternity as a child who can never grow up."

"I didn't want him to grow up."

"That's monstrous."

Lugh shrugged. "Would you have given him up?"

"Yes."

Lugh threaded the blue ball through the fingers of his left hand. He looked like a magician. "And if the choice was between his freedom and your own, what then? Or perhaps his life or your own?"

"He's a child, Lugh. Adults protect children." The ball flowed backward and forward, backward and forward, and then a second ball, yellow in color, chased the first.

"Shall we put your resolve to the test? The yellow ball is Alston's freedom, the blue ball is your own." The Sidhe placed the yellow ball under the centre cup and the blue under the right hand cup. He shuffled the cups slowly on the bar top. "There is no sleight of hand here, Doctor, just a choice to be made." The Sidhe pulled his hands away theatrically. "Choose. The boy or yourself."

* * *

Burnell burst into the kitchen. Silver looked up from where she was trying to coax Alston to eat more of the stew. The boy was sitting hunched on a stool.

“What’s happened?” Silver asked.

“The Doctor is going to need that nightshade. Mother Cleary can make the tincture but I’ll need to fetch the herb from the forest.”

“The Sidhe hunt the forest,” Alston said. “It won’t be safe there.”

Burnell thumped the table with the torch in his fist, making Silver and Alston jerk back in surprise. “The Doctor just bought your life with his own.”

“What?” the boy asked, dazed.

“Alston is The Sailor in Mother Cleary’s reading,” Burnell explained to Silver. “Lugh is making the Doctor decide between saving himself or Alston depending on which cup he picks.”

“He’ll pick Alston’s,” Silver said with conviction.

“That’s what I figured.” Burnell rounded on the boy. “Now, is there anything you can tell me to avoid this hunt?”

Alston slid from the stool. “I’ll go. I’m the only one who has experience dodging a hunt and if I am caught they won’t kill me. I may not like serving Lugh, but I am under his protection.”

“No,” Silver said. “I’m not letting a child go out there.”

“What does nightshade look like?” Alston asked, ignoring Silver’s statement.

Burnell shrugged. “From what Mother Cleary described; dark green leaves, about three inches high, grows in damp mossy indents — ”

“You mean you don’t know?” Silver swore at the ceiling. “Great goddess, you’re liable to bring back anything. I’ll go, I know what it looks like.” She stood up, grabbed the torch out of Burnell’s hand, and headed for the back door.

“I’m coming too,” Alston said. “You know what to look for and I know how to evade the hunt.”

Silver turned to disagree with him. “Please let me do this,” the boy begged. “I was a help to you all earlier in the forest and I can be so again.”

“Let him go with you,” Burnell said. “In this, he will be more help to you than me with a gun.” The boy nodded. Silver stood undecided at the door. “All right. But you do exactly what I say,” she said pointing her finger at him.

The two slipped out the back door leaving Burnell alone in the kitchen. Sighing, he put the kettle on the stove to boil and went back into the taproom.

* * *

The Doctor stood staring at the three orange cups. “Tell me what would happen if I choose Alston’s freedom.”

“The boy stays here.”

The Doctor sighed. “What happens to me?”

“Ah!” Lugh poured himself a drink from behind the bar. He filled a shot glass for the Doctor. “We take a walk in the forest.”

“And?”

Lugh threw back his head and drank the liquor. He pulled a face as he looked into his empty glass. “I abandon you to the hunt.”

“Bres will find me?”

“Yes.”

“And execute me?”

“Yes.” The Sidhe put his glass down and smiled at the Doctor. “He’ll think you’re me.”

The Doctor left his own glass untouched. “I can take my own life, you know?”

Lugh frowned. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d do that, but that option is yours if you wish to take it.”

The Doctor picked up the middle cup revealing the yellow ball. “I wish to take it.”

* * *

Alston and Silver had reached the edge of the forest. There were bodies on the ground, hairy and chimpanzee-like, and Silver tried not to notice them as the torch light panned over the forest floor.

“Where will this plant most likely be found?” Alston asked.

“Somewhere wet and shaded.”

“Wet,” the boy repeated. “Would it be found where moss is found?”

“Yes.” Silver stepped over a severed hand. The long attenuated fingers ended in talons and the hand was curled up. Silver’s stomach lurched.

Alston moved on, seemingly oblivious to the carnage. “We’ll head for the stream.”

Silver put her sleeve over her nose and mouth. “Is there another way we could go?”

“This is the safest way. By following the wake of the hunt, we’re less likely to come across the hunt or anything living that would wish us harm.”

The thought of finding a dead human on the trail made Silver gag. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Alston stopped but stared ahead. “You are already doing it.”

“But what if we find a human body up there?”

Alston walked forward. “We won’t. The Sidhe will only kill a warrior during a hunt. All others would be captured and taken back to the Summerlands.”

“Is that what happened to you?”

The boy shook his head. “No. I had a pet wolf cub that ran into the forest. I was trying to find him when Lugh found me.”

“Did he hurt you?” Silver asked softly.

“No. He asked me if I wanted to see a wondrous land of green fields and gleaming streams; a place unlike any other. I said yes.”

“So he took you there.”

Alston nodded. “And it was marvellous, but when I said I should leave...that my Ma would be worried, he wouldn’t let me go back.”

The track divided with the smaller fork heading off to the right. Alston shone the light down that path. “This should lead to the stream.” He played the light over the other pathway and the beam picked up little imp bodies scattered along the track. “The hunt went that way.”

“Well personally, I’m pleased to be going in the other direction,” Silver said.

Alston headed down the track. “We won’t stand a chance if we meet a Firbolg or a Fomarian down here.”

They walked in silence. Silver scanned both sides of the track, while listening so hard that she could hear her pulse thrumming rhythmically in her ears. Over that sound she picked out the gurgling of water.

“I think I hear the stream,” she whispered to Alston. They walked a little faster. It was deathly quiet in the forest. The insects and forest animals had abandoned the

unnatural night. Alston shone the light at their feet. The ground glistened with moisture. He panned the flashlight around the surrounding forest.

Silver stepped off the path toward the trees. There was moss on the ground and sheltered between the gnarled roots of a tree, some nightshade. "It's here," she said excitedly. Alston shone the light obligingly at the ground so she could pick the stalks. Standing up with her catch she turned around and gasped. A light was growing back in the forest along the path they'd followed.

Alston turned to see the growing dawn, and flicked off his torch.

"The hunt's coming." He grabbed Silver's hand and led her away from the path, deeper into the forest. "We'll shelter behind a tree."

"What about one of these?" Silver asked as they passed between two birches.

"No, as far from the path as we can get."

The light from the hunt brightened until it helped illuminate their way. "There," Alston said. "That big one."

They crouched behind the tree, Alston still holding Silver's hand. In his other hand he clutched the river stone about his neck. The light grew brighter until Silver closed her eyes. She could hear the jingling of bells and the sound of the hunt as it pushed its way down the narrow leafy trail. A branch snapped and a horse's hoof skidded on some loose gravel. Silver held her breath. *Empty. Nothing.*

"Are you sure there's something down here?" The voice was musical but had an underlying coldness to it like a breeze blowing through chimes of ice.

"I'd bet my lance on it." Bells jingled.

"Well, I don't sense anything."

Alston's grip on her hand tightened painfully. The boy's body was trembling. *Empty. Nothing.* The feeling of being alone thickened around her.

"There's something hiding in the trees but it's shadowed...vague." Stems snapped and leaves rubbed together as a horse plunged into the shrubbery. Bells jingled wildly and the light bobbed nearer.

"There's too many of them," Alston sighed in resignation. He let go of Silver's hand and stood up. The sense of emptiness vanished. Before she could react, Alston had stepped out from behind the tree and into the harsh glare of the light. Silver saw him raise an arm to shield his eyes.

"Well, if it isn't the maggot."

"Lord Bres," Alston replied. His voice sounded small and lost.

Bells jingled and the tip of a shining white lance touched Alston's chest, emerging from the light silhouetting the surrounds.

"Be careful, Bres, he's still Lugh's boy."

"Not for much longer," Bres remarked coldly. The lance tip pressed into Alston's chest forcing the boy to step back. "When Lugh's gone, he's mine to do with as I please."

"You should give him to Tailia. She's always liked the soft skin and hair."

The lance tip moved up the side of Alston's face to fluff his hair. "Maybe I'll take him for myself," Bres said. "Then I'll have my predecessor's title *and* his boy."

"My lord isn't dead yet," Alston spat. "And until he is, you can do scat all."

"Still no manners, little vagabond. I'll rectify that on my return." The lance tip receded and the bright light ebbed. "Now, don't wander too far, little maggot. I'll be looking for you once I've removed your master's head."

The light waned and the noise faded until Silver was sitting in the dark with her heartbeat pounding in her ears. "Alston," she called softly.

"I'm here. You can turn the light on. They won't come back."

She thumbed the switch and flooded the small grove with light. "Are you all right?"

"Bres has never liked me. Among the Sidhe, Lugh is a very good master."

"That doesn't say much for the Sidhe."

"Ceirnan says they are hard to understand. Their cruelty is not always intended...they are just different." Pausing for a moment, the boy nodded and pushed his way through the damp bracken and onto the path. "This way."

* * *

The Doctor sat on a chair in the kitchen. Burnell sat in the opposite chair and old Mother Cleary bustled about the stove. Beyond the door, Lugh waited patiently in the taproom. The Doctor had managed to fob off the Sidhe's company by saying his death was something he'd rather plan and perform in private, amid a small group of friends. The Sun God was being very sporting and supportive.

The back door opened and Silver and Alston entered the kitchen. The Doctor was on his feet before the door closed.

"You had me worried," he said in an undertone while catching Silver in an embrace. "I believe I've already rescued you from the hunt tonight." The Doctor's gaze fell to the boy. "Or rather Alston has."

"And he did so again," Silver said, extricating herself from the hug. "Plus we have the nightshade." She held the plant aloft.

"Bring it here, girl," Mother Cleary said. "We need to steep it in boiling water."

Silver crossed to the stove, and Alston stood by the door. He seemed in awe of the Doctor. "Thank you, sir," he stammered. "For securing my freedom."

"That's all right, Alston." The Doctor squatted to the boy's height. "I want you to stay with Silver until all this has played out. Will you do that?"

The boy nodded and the Doctor reached out and ruffled his hair. "Good lad."

The Doctor turned to the women at the stove. "Just three stalks, Mrs. Cleary."

"That's hardly enough to fell a fly," the old woman grumbled.

"It will be enough for Lugh to think I am dead."

"And after that?" Silver asked.

"After that, Lugh will take my body to the forest for Bres to find."

"Bres!" Silver stated alarmed. "But we don't know if Bres will fall for this again."

"He doesn't have to." The Doctor walked back to the table and sat on it. "I intend to tell Bres that I am not Lugh."

"Are you mad?" Silver admonished.

"Trust me, Silver."

"But don't you think the other victims would have tried that before?"

"No, because I doubt Lugh left them the opportunity to speak for themselves. He would have used glamour and compulsion on them to ensure that Bres had no inkling of what was going on."

"Will he use that on you?" Burnell asked.

"Glamour, yes, but you can't compel a dead man."

Midway between the table and the stove, Silver stood with nothing she could think of to say.

"Trust me, Silver." The Doctor turned his attention to Mother Cleary. "That should be ready now."

The woman poured the liquid into a cup. "I wouldn't give this to someone to pull a tooth. All this is going to give you is a case of gripe." She held the cup out to the Doctor. Her

lips were compressed in stern disapproval. He drank down the contents and settled himself on the table. The table was long enough that he could lie on it without any part of him hanging off the end. "Silver will monitor my heart beat." He stared at her poignantly and she nodded. "When you can no longer detect a beat, call in Lugh."

The Doctor closed his eyes and eased into a comfortable position. His breathing slowed. Silver put her fingers at his neck. When she could no longer feel the pulse through her fingers she put her ear to his chest. It was silent and his chest no longer moved. He was, for all intents and purposes, dead.

Burnell opened the door to the taproom. It was quiet in there. The patrons seated around the room like mourners at a wake. The background murmur of voices hushed as if Burnell was about to deliver a eulogy for the deceased. Lugh came to his feet, and stepped through the door into the kitchen.

The Sidhe avidly studied the Doctor lying on the table. He approached the body and placed a hand just above the Doctor's nose and mouth. He felt for a pulse in the Doctor's neck and then listened for a heartbeat in his chest. Lugh straightened and rested a hand on the Doctor's forehead. The Doctor's body wavered as if viewed through water, and then he was gone. Silver gasped. Lugh stood over his own body on the table.

The Sidhe picked up the body as if it weighed nothing. The reposed form was limber and slack in his arms and seemingly asleep. Lugh looked beautiful dead, and Silver wondered if that was due to the glamour or if he really was that lovely.

"I'll take him out the back way," the Sidhe said. Alston was closest to the door and he opened it slowly. Lugh paused on the threshold and gazed down at the boy.

"So this is goodbye."

Alston nodded.

"I expect I'll miss you, boy."

Carrying his burden, the Sidhe stepped out into the night.

* * *

Lugh placed the Doctor's body on the ground near a tree. He made some alterations to the hex so that his white shirt was rent and covered in blood. Beneath the shirt's tatters, his flesh was torn in a huge gash as though a tusk had pierced the skin. Then the Sidhe left.

The Doctor was vaguely aware of sounds and sensations. He heard bells and light played against his eyelids. A tree root was digging into his back.

"It seems you're to be robbed of your victory, Bres," a cold voice intoned.

A boot prodded the Doctor in the side, just below his ribs. The drug in his system dulled the discomfort and his body did not react. His self-induced coma was lifting but the nightshade had a greater hold on him than he expected. His tongue felt thick in his mouth and he could not move. He needed to move. He needed to talk!

"Robbed of my victory or tricked out of it?"

Metal sang, a single pure note that hung on the air. The sound faded and the Doctor felt a cold tip touch his throat. He tried to work saliva into his dry mouth. He needed to talk.

The pricking at his throat disappeared and air swirled around his face. His ears were assaulted by loud scrunching noises situated on both sides of his head. Boots he surmised. Someone had set their feet either side of his head. The blade returned to his throat again, but this time angled to drive down into his neck at the hollow where his collarbones met.

"Wait," the Doctor said.

He did not know if he had been heard but the blade pressure lessened and then disappeared. Shadows played across his closed eyelids and his hair was pulled as fingers brushed his skull. His head jerked as his assailant used the fist full of hair like a string to a marionette.

“Not dead yet?” Bres’ voice breathed in his ear. “Let me put you out of your misery.”

The Doctor’s tongue felt too big for his mouth and he had trouble moving his jaw. “Not Lugh,” he gasped. His assailant exhaled against his cheek. Bres’ breath was cold and smelled fresh like the air after a sudden storm.

“Is he still alive?” someone asked.

“He claims not to be Lugh,” Bres said.

“Could be a trick.”

While they discussed him, the Doctor frantically worked to get more moisture in his mouth.

“Just kill him and be done with it.”

“Two hearts,” the Doctor blurted.

“What?” Bres asked.

The Doctor breathed deeply to get more air into his lungs. The drug was beginning to loosen its hold on him but it was very slow. He cracked his eyes open a sliver. The light hurt them but he endured it. “I have two hearts.”

Bres gingerly put his palm on the Doctor’s chest. He took his hand away. It was covered in blood.

“It’s an illusion, Bres, a glamour,” the Doctor said. “Break through it.”

With great disdain the Sidhe lowered his head to the Doctor’s chest. The blood spoiled his fair face, his pale hair and his white clothes. He listened to one side of the Doctor’s chest and then the other.

“There are two hearts.” The blood on the Sidhe evaporated like tiny bits of mirrored flecks dissolving into nothing as the glamour broke. On the ground, a stranger in a brown suit lay beside Bres’ knee.

“Lugh’s still out there,” someone said.

The Doctor levered himself up onto his elbows. Bres looked down at him coldly.

“Where’s Lugh?”

“Probably on his way back to the Summerlands,” the Doctor said. “It is almost dawn.”

The Sidhe swore and the coldness in his eyes was replaced by anger. A horse’s harness jingled, as one of the other riders edged closer to Bres. “We’ve missed our opportunity. If Lugh isn’t executed by the end of this day, he can petition the court and challenge you in combat directly.”

“I am well aware of that fact,” Bres replied coldly. He stood in a fluid movement and the point of his sword found the Doctor’s throat. Frustration and rage simmered in Bres’ eyes.

“I have a contest with Lugh,” the Doctor said around the intrusive object. “Until it is satisfied I am under his protection.”

Bres swore again, and glanced away, seemingly looking off into space. The sword tipped wavered from the Doctor’s throat. A muscle worked in Bres’ cheek and he turned a calculating look on the Doctor. “You mentioned a contest. Who won?”

The Doctor licked his lips. “The conditions required for Lugh to win have not been met.”

Laughing, Bres bent down, seized the Doctor by his coat lapels and swung him to his unsteady feet. “So the vaunted Lugh has lost a contest and doesn’t yet know it.” Bres

vaulted into his saddle. Catching the back of the Doctor's collar, the Sidhe hauled the Time Lord up onto the horse's back. "He's finally been beaten and I can't wait to tell him. It almost makes up for not killing him."

* * *

The entrance to the Summerlands resembled a burial mound. Bres dumped the Doctor and then led the host into a tunnel lined with smokeless torches that converged into a ball of light at the tunnel's far end. After a few moments, a dark smudge appeared in the middle of the light and as it grew it took on the shape of a man. Lugh walked out of the tunnel.

"Bres said you still lived."

"Yes, and you and I had a deal."

"I haven't forgotten."

"Close the way."

"It will be done." The Sidhe looked speculatively at the Doctor. "The Summerlands lie at the end of that tunnel."

The Doctor rubbed his hands together. "Yes, I know."

Lugh looked down the lighted tunnel. "All the wonder, knowledge and achievement of the Sidhe." Lugh glanced askance at the Doctor. "You seem like one who would appreciate an opportunity to explore such a world."

The Doctor recalled the faces of Silver and Alston and shook his head. "I cannot. I have commitments here."

"Pity." Lugh turned and walked into the tunnel's mouth. "I would have enjoyed a rematch of chess." As he passed up the tunnel the torches extinguished and the light inside faded to a mere pinpoint that winked out leaving the Doctor staring at a dark maw. Then the Doctor was staring at a grassy mound. The entrance to the tunnel had vanished.

* * *

Alston stared in wonder at the inside of the TARDIS. "The Sidhe have wondrous things, but I have not seen anything like this."

Silver smiled at him and tousled his hair as the TARDIS dematerialized and then rematerialized in exactly the same spot but seven hundred years and a day earlier. "We're here," the Doctor said.

Dirt had replaced the bitumen on the road, which was deserted at this early hour of the day. Alston led them to his house and the Doctor knocked on the door.

The door opened and a man's tired face found new life when he saw Alston. "Boy, you've returned to us."

"Yes, Papa."

A woman pushed by the man and fell on her knees in front of Alston, hugging him. "I'm home Mama," he said touching her hair. "These people brought me home."

Alston's father looked at the Doctor and Silver.

"I need to talk with you," the Doctor said. He led the man to the corner of the house. Silver watched as the Doctor pulled some nightshade from his pocket and earnestly explained something to Alston's father. The man nodded looking grave. He took the nightshade.

The woman invited the Doctor and Silver into her home, but the Doctor politely refused, saying he wished to be on his way. They said their goodbyes to Alston and walked back along the road to the TARDIS.

“What did you say to Alston’s father?” Silver asked.

“I told him that Lugh would return for the boy tonight and if he wished to keep his son safe, he would need to challenge Lugh and get the Sidhe to close the way.”

“Then, Alston’s father is the mortal who originally defeated Lugh and got him to close the way?”

The Doctor shrugged. “What’s important is that the way will be closed.”

Silver placed her hand against the TARDIS’ door. “Doctor, if the way hadn’t been closed, would I have seen my parents?”

“Perhaps.” The Doctor let the key rest in the lock and faced Silver. “But if their spirits had been diverted to the Summerlands, Silver, they would have been trapped serving the Sidhe just as Ceirnan was and still is trapped. Is that what you would wish for them?”

Silver lowered her eyes and shook her head. “No,” she said softly. “I’d want them to be free. But, if they’re not in the Summerlands, then where are they?”

“Ah, now that...” The Doctor turned the key and pushed open the door indicating for Silver to precede him. “...is the eternal mystery.”

She stepped across the threshold, calling over her shoulder. “So, even the Time Lords don’t know the answer?”

“Not yet and we’ve spent a fair amount of time looking.”

The door swung shut, cutting them off from the early morning sunshine and the first cock’s crow.

“So, where too now?” Silver asked. She looked up to see the Doctor frowning at a section of the console. She edged closer to see what he was looking at. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He stepped in front of the screen, effectively cutting off her view.

“A message. Just a message from an old friend.”

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

DAY OF THE DEAD LESLEIGH FORCE



Something wicked this way comes.

On Halloween Silver enacts a ritual to contact her dead parents but it is not her parents who answer her call.

At the local inn the Doctor partakes in some Halloween fun but the festivities are shattered by the appearance and attack of monsters in the forest.

Rescuing a stranger, the Doctor finds himself challenged to a set of games that will cost either his life or that of a child.

To escape his predicament, the Doctor must unravel the truth behind the legends of Samhain/Halloween.



This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the ninth Doctor as played by Anton Robbins

